Comparing Students' Turn-taking Behaviour in Group Discussions under Different Cultural Backgrounds

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Abstract. In the context of globalization, cross-cultural communication has become increasingly prevalent, with international collaboration and exchange in educational settings. Turn-taking is an essential part of verbal communication, and previous study has shown how it is systematically organized and behaves within a particular cultural group. However, there is still a lack of knowledge on how cultural background affects turn-taking behaviors. Thus, using a qualitative examination of how cultural variations affect these techniques, this research looks at how five turn-taking methods—overlap, interruption, pause, back channeling, and turn-holding—are used in group discussions among Chinese, American, and Indian students. The results of the research show a wide range of turn-taking techniques employed by these three student groups.. In Chinese student discussions, pauses are the most prevalent turn-taking strategy, with others used less frequently. American students, on the other hand, frequently employ overlap and back channeling. Indian students stand out as the only group utilizing interruption and exhibit a rich repertoire of turn-holding strategies. Hence, it can be seen that cultural background has a profound impact on the use of turn taking strategies in group discussions.

Keywords: Turn-taking, group discussion, cross-culture study, university students.

1. Introduction

Turn-taking, a significant aspect of verbal communication, has garnered considerable attention from linguists, educators, and researchers, especially in language acquisition and interaction contexts. Sacks et al.'s and Ting-Toomey's seminal publications emphasize the systematic structure of turn-taking and the impact of cultural influences, respectively. Numerous research conducted worldwide demonstrate the complex relationship between turn-taking behaviors and a range of social and psychological elements that influence conversational participation. However, there is still a lack of research on the ways that cultural variations affect turn-taking habits, particularly when group discussions are included.

To bridge this gap, this research investigates the turn-taking behaviors of Chinese, American, and Indian university students as samples in group discussions. Employing a qualitative research design, the analysis involves an in-depth examination of students' five turn-taking strategies: overlap, pause, interruption, back channeling, and turn-holding strategy. The project attempts to shed light on how social norms and cultural values affect group discussion turn-taking patterns using thematic analysis of three representative video recordings. It also hopes to improve knowledge of cross-cultural communication in educational settings. The results are intended to enhance research on the cultural aspects of turn-taking habits and offer guidance to English language learners and educators in order to promote fair participation.

2. Literature Review

In the realm of language acquisition and interaction, turn-taking has been a long-standing area of interest for linguists, educators, and researchers. This section of the literature review focuses on analyzing Chinese college school students' turn-taking strategies, the situation of turn-taking in the world and cross-culture communication, specifically drawing insights from influential works and recent studies.

2.1. The two foundational works

The research commences with two influential works, the first one is a seminal work by Sacks, Schegloff, and Jefferson, who laid the foundation for understanding the systematic organization of turn-taking in conversation [1]. Their groundbreaking study, "A simplest systematics for the organization of turn-taking for conversation," provides a comprehensive framework that guided numerous investigations into the conversational structure. This framework not only elucidates the rules governing who speaks when but also delves into the mechanisms that facilitate smooth transitions between speakers, thereby maintaining the flow and coherence of discourse.

The second, Ting-Toomey's book “Communicating across cultures” highlights the importance of cultural factors in shaping communication styles [2]. Power distance, individualism versus collectivism, and high-context versus low-context communication are three cultural differences that can have a big impact on how people participate in group discussions. These differences are important to understand because they could explain why American and Chinese students take turns differently given their different cultural backgrounds.

2.2. Turn-taking situation in Chinese students

In China, several studies have specifically explored turn-taking educational contexts, particularly in English language classrooms. In their analysis of turn-taking between teachers and students in college English classes, Yang and An emphasized the value of successful turn-taking techniques in raising student engagement and advancing language learning [3, 4]. Even though the focus of these research is on the interaction between teachers and students, they offer important insights on the mechanics of conversational turn-taking in Chinese classrooms.

Liu's empirical study analyzed the turn-taking behaviour of 30 recorded conversation corpora, and the results showed the challenges faced by English learners in China: the turn-taking mechanism of most participants was not active, and the turn-taking was long, the role change was slow, the feedback type was monotonous and high frequency [5].

Furthermore, Chen and Lu, based on a self-built corpus, further extend this discussion by exploring the application of turn-taking strategies in college English corners, identifying frequent strategies used, and also highlighting monotonous forms and limited types [6]. It discusses means to enhance these strategies in English corner activities emphasizing their role in fostering language proficiency and social interaction as well.

2.3. The status of turn-taking worldwide

Gibson's examination of turn-taking in group discussions reveals the social and psychological factors that influence conversational participation [7]. This article's themes of obligation, involvement, and alienation are especially pertinent when taking cultural variations in turn-taking customs into account. During open class discussions, Karas specifically tackles turn-taking and silent learning, highlighting the significance of identifying and resolving unequal participation patterns in a classroom setting [8].

Dewi, Suharsono, and Munir explore the relationship between turn-taking strategies and EFL learners' personality and power in English conversation classes. Their findings underscore the complexity of turn-taking dynamics and the need to consider individual differences when analyzing conversational behavior[9]. Ryan and Forrest propose pedagogical strategies for turn-taking problems in second language learning, emphasizing the role of teachers in facilitating equitable participation in group discussions [10].

van Os, de Jong, and Bosker emphasize the role of turn-taking behavior in shaping perceived fluency in both native and nonnative speech, finding that for native huspeech, too eager or reluctant answers negatively impact fluency perceptions, while for nonnative speech, only too reluctant answers cause a decline in fluency [11]. In focus group discussions with Malaysian undergraduate students, Abdullah and Swee Heng examine the use of overlap, interruption, and pause. They propose

that overlap is used to support propositions, interruptions are uncommon, and pauses are common, reflecting cultural upbringing and conversational practices learned during childhood [12].

In summary, the reviewed literature underscores the diverse nature of turn-taking in group discussions, particularly when considering cultural differences. This research intends to investigate the unique case of turn-taking practices in group talks by American and Chinese college students by analyzing insights from linguistics, sociology, and education. In order to fully comprehend and address the difficulties faced by students from diverse backgrounds in educational settings, further research is necessary, as evidenced by the gaps and contradictions in the body of existing literature that have been found, particularly with regard to cross-cultural comparisons.

3. Methods

3.1. Research Design

The present research adopts a qualitative research approach to investigate the complexities of turn-taking behaviors in students' group discussions in different cultural backgrounds. This approach places a high priority on having a thorough grasp of the circumstances and nature of the different turn-taking methods that children utilize, particularly in the areas of overlap, halt, interruption, back channeling, and turn-holding. The objective is to illuminate how cultural values and social norms influence communication patterns, especially in how students navigate turn-taking in their interactions. The theoretical perspective of this research emphasizes the crucial role of cultural factors in shaping communication practices, allowing for a deeper exploration of the complexity behind student discourse in group discussions.

3.2. Sample Selection

The sample for this research comprises three video recordings of group discussions from three distinct cultural contexts: China, the United States, and India. The video, which features four Chinese university students participating in a group discussion assignment for an English class, was chosen from the Chinese video platform Bilibili. The discussion, which centered on the idea that "Pets are for people without children," lasted for 16 minutes and 22 seconds. It included a range of viewpoints regarding the place of pets in the lives of those who have children or not.

The video of American students was selected from YouTube, featuring a roundtable discussion among five University of Oregon undergraduates, moderated by an alumnus. In this 19:26-long video, students discussed a topic on "Black Student Life and Activism in Honor of Black History Month." The panelists shared their experiences and activism as black students, celebrating the month with insights and reflections.

The video of Indian students was selected from YouTube, displaying six Indian students in the official English examination by the Indian government. This movie was 22 minutes and 45 seconds long, of which 15 minutes and 50 seconds were devoted to conversation. "Digital Currency and Its Impact on the Economy" was the subject of debate. They provide a range of viewpoints and analysis as they examine the advantages, difficulties, and potential effects of digital currencies on the Indian economy.

3.3. Data Analysis

The data analysis for this qualitative research involved four steps: corpus collection, corpus transcription, corpus observation and analysis and corpus characterization. The conversational dynamics were preserved by transcribing the three group discussion films exactly as they were said. After transcription, a thematic analysis approach was used to find patterns and themes related to the use of the five turn-taking strategies: overlap, pause, interruption, back channeling, and turn-holding strategy. Representative corpora were selected from the transcribed corpora for analysis and generalization.

Throughout the analysis, attention was paid to cultural differences in the way each group of students employs the turn-taking strategies. The aim is to uncover not only the presence or absence of certain strategies but also the meanings and motivations behind their use, providing rich insights into the complexities of cross-cultural communication in group discussions.

4. Results

4.1. Overlap

4.1.1 Chinese students

In the video, the occurrence of overlap among team members during turn-taking was minimal. Every time they discussed a topic that overlapped, the four students shared personal experiences and opinions with each other. Moments of overlap or closely hooked turns only occurred when less relevant utterances emerged, such as frivolous jokes exchanged or remarks that elicited communal amusement or empathy (see Datum 1.1).

Datum 1.1

T1 Student B: (xxx) your (xxx) dog's name could be EiEi.=
T2 Student D: =[okok, thank you thank you ((laughter))]
T3 Student B, C: [((laughter))]

In Datum 1.1, Student B's utterance was a hilarious joke towards Student D, arousing Student D's no-gap response and other students' laughs, forming overlap and closely launched turns.

4.1.2 American students

The video of the American student group discussion showcases a relatively high frequency of overlap phenomenon during turn-taking, particularly evident when multiple members intended to voice their opinions simultaneously. When one team member began to hold the floor in this manner, there would frequently be multiple overlaps in his or her speech until the next person who wished to speak had the turn and finished, as Datum 1.2 illustrates.

Datum 1.2

T1 Student E: You know, you (0.8) show this self confidence in yourself. You know who you are as a person, and you have all these people behind you that, you know, love and support you. (0.5) It's just really important, (0.4) so=
T2 Student D: = Yes, Robin, I love that advice. [(...) Can I talk] about that for a second?
T3 Student B: [I love that too.]
T4 Student D: It is okay to be different. I think people need to hear that it is okay to not be like the other people that you are seeing. Because they're trying to fit in with other people that they're seeing, right? I like I like [that a lot.]
T5 Student B: [I love that!] The whole find yourself idea. I was literally gonna pick that off too. [Oh my goodness, I love that too.]
Other Students: [((laughter))]
T6 Student B: I would say for prospective students and just like, like students of color, don't come on this campus thinking you're just the ethnicity or race you identity as, you're so much more than that and, like (0.9) it's no greater feeling to then to stunt ((laughter)) and to show out and expose yourself.

In Datum 1.2, Students D and B intend to speak simultaneously after Student E completes her turns, forming the first overlap. Student D holds the floor first, and at the end of his speech, Student B eagerly wants to speak, forming the second overlap.

4.1.3 Indian students

Notable overlap phenomena were seen in the video of the Indian student group discussion when multiple participants tried to take the floor at the same time. After these incidents, there are often clear closely hooked twists in the discussion that follows, suggesting that the group has adapted their

conversational cadence to account for the initial interruption and is speaking in a more coherent manner without visible pauses. according to Datum 1.3.

Datum 1.3

T1 Student B: So, but if you talk about that and we can start using it and we can give more benefit to privileged part and we can have a [great impact.]

T2 Student E: [So]

T3 Student A: [But] when you are speaking about awareness, India has a large population. So it is like impossible when we are setting something new, it is like impossible for government to approach everyone, and everyone to have a knowledge about that. So when we are speaking about digital through India is growing on digital part and it might take a lot of time to fully achieve that. And I hope it is going to be a long journey to the population of India and especially when it is on rural side, the digital world is going to reach on a, it might take a longer part.=

T4 Student F: = Actually, it might not take a longer time because before some time only India has launched the UPI thing.=

T5 Student A: =Yeah.=

T6 Student F: = And it was successful that many people are using the UPI and we also we do not carry cash. You are getting my point, right?

T7 Student A: Right.

In Datum 1.3, Students E and A want to take the turn simultaneously after Student B's speech, forming an overlap. Student F has a different opinion about Student B's utterance, thus several no gap turns occur in the following turns.

4.2. Interruption

4.2.1 Chinese students

The video shows no instances of interruption during the group discussion. Similar to the overlap section, only rarely did instances of overlap or no gap occur, such as less significant statements for the discussion topic emerged.

4.2.2 American students

The video footage of the group discussion records no instances of interruption, despite moments where more than one participant concurrently desires to take the turn. Using Datum 2 as an additional example, only overlap would occur in this scenario: the student who took the floor first to speak would finish his or her turn, and then the second student would begin. This would ensure that the conversation continued uninterrupted and without any interruptions.

4.2.3 Indian students

In the video, the occurrence of interruptions in the group discussion is not uncommon, similar to the emergence of overlaps where two or more participants concurrently seek to speak. Although these concurrent efforts sometimes result in nothing more than an overlap, they can also sometimes intensify into complete disruptions, as Datum 2.1 illustrates. Interestingly, there are times when a person immediately interrupts another participant who is in the middle of their turn, starting a new discourse turn and causing an interruption, as Datum 2.2 illustrates. In addition, after these interruptions happened, overlap and no gap turns would frequently emerge in the following conversation.

Datum 2.1

T1 Student E: So when we say this digital currency will include these other rural areas, because they have access to mobile phones and which will lead more inclusion to that area and which will build more through which they can participate in the economy and build more wealth with us.=

T2 Student C: =[Um (xxx)]

((interruption))

T3 Student F: =[Yeah, but] the thing is 75 percent of our population is using the phone, but 35 percent of it doesn't know how to use a smartphone. So there is a lack where the CDPC can lack and many frauds can happen like in the city Jantara. So there are a lot of people facing the issue that they receive phone calls and many others through messages. They just asked to transfer the money and there will be lack of awareness. So, I think there should be some webinars or some some kind of awareness when the CDPC will be launching the digital currency.=

T4 Student C: = I would agree to Rita. Like, she's saying there is population that don't have access to internet like he said. So many people it is making digital currency is making easier things for many people, but it is very complicated for uneducated illiterate section of the India.

In Datum 2.1, Student F interrupts Student C's unclear utterance and holds the floor after Student E's speech, forming an interruption. Student C eagerly wants to speak after Student F's speech, thus, a closely latched turn occurs.

Datum 2.2

T1 Student F: So I think they will be picking up and India is I guess on the fourth [um...]
((interruption))

T2 Student A: [Yeah. As] long as like we make practice out of it everyone will understand and will make use of it.=

T3 Student E: [= (xxx)]

T4 Student B: [As per the] report 90% of the people use the UPI transaction[so at]

T5 Student A: [I (xxx)]

T6 Student B: This point we have 90% of the population already using the UPI transaction. As you can see, the vegetable stores are everywhere, where they were not used to accept the UPI transaction, now they are also using the UPI transaction. So we cannot say it will take a longer time, but awareness is very important so we have to focus on that part.=

T7 Student A: [=(xxx)]

T8 Student C: [= But] as you are saying that 90% of population doing UPI transaction like I don't think that is correct data because around 70% of Indian population don't have the accessibility or don't use that kind.

In Datum 2.2, Student A directly interrupted Student F's ongoing speech, resulting in multiple overlaps and no-gap turns during the intense communication among Students A, E, B and C.

4.3. Pause

4.3.1 Chinese students

The video shows that group members frequently halt during turn-taking as well as during individual utterances. Specifically, there are frequently discernible pauses when a student finishes speaking before another one smoothly assumes the floor, which causes breaks in the flow of the conversation. Furthermore, as seen in Datum 3.1, the student who wished to hold the floor would be extra cautious after an exceptionally lengthy silence, frequently halting in his or her subsequent utterance and making quieter sounds.

Datum 3.1

T1 Student C: Overall, pet ownership can have a positive impact on a person's life, but it's important to carefully consider the time resources and commitment required by adopting a pet.

(2.39) ((C Eye contact with Student D and then Student B))

T2 Student A: °I want to° (0.4) share:: um (0.2) my own experience of keeping um(.) keeping a pet.

In Datum 3.1, after Student C finished her speech, no one took turns in time, thus an abnormally long pause occurred. After eye contact, Student A began to hold the floor with a softer voice and several pauses occurred.

4.3.2 American students

There are hardly any obvious gaps in the group debate that is captured on camera, as members talk turns in a fluid interchange. Rather, as Datum 3.3 illustrates, the only discernible pauses were the brief pauses that occurred between each speaker's turn and were most likely the result of thought processes or reflective moments. Overall, there were no noticeable pauses in the discourse, and the discussion continued at a steady pace.

Datum 3.3

T1 Student B : I feel like that's something we need on a PWI predominately withe institution, um just because we are the minority and I feel like knowing our history, knowing our culture, like those who've come before us will actually kind of (1.1) make us (0.6) uh, how do I say this? (0.9) Um:: (1.6) make us (0.5) kind of (0.2) appreciate where we came from, and kind of (0.6) notice how far we've made it since then and how far we can (0.8) go even past that and how much we can (0.6) um (0.4) make advancements in the future for whatever situation that were in right now.

In Datum 3.3, Student B experienced pauses multiple times due to hesitation in how to express himself.

4.3.3 Indian students

The video displays a continuous flow of conversation during the group discussion, with participants smoothly transitioning from one speaker to the next without notable pauses. Furthermore, among each participant's utterances, no obvious pauses could be discovered.

4.4. Back channeling

4.4.1 Chinese students

The video reveals a predominant role played by nonverbal back channeling, while verbal back channeling seldom occurs during the discussion. While a participant shares their perspective on a topic directly linked to the group discussion, most other participants respond with nods or eye contact, or occasionally with a simple "yeah" that indicates they are paying attention. According to Datum 4.1, a verbal back channeling sentence only appears when a member offers a personal experience that strikes a chord, eliciting feelings and encouraging others to reply vocally.

Datum 4.1

T1 Student B: °I want to° (0.4) share:: um (0.2) my own experience of keeping um keeping a pet. Long time ago, when I was in primary school, I got good grades and my mom promised me to keep a pet. Yeah, then we go to the pet store and purchased a rabbit who name Tubi, °yeah°.

T2 Student C: Wow, it sounds interesting! I can hardly imagine that you have a rabbit.

In Datum 4.1, Student C gave a brief response and commented on the experience that Student B shared.

4.4.2 American students

The video of this group discussion shows a high frequency of active back channeling, where a simple "yeah" predominantly marked agreement or acknowledgement. The many instances of longer response sentences, as indicated in Datum 4.2, which indicate a greater engagement in the discourse, were noteworthy nonetheless. The active and involved character of the participants' interactions was further reinforced by the frequent observation of nonverbal positive back channeling, particularly nodding.

Datum 4.2

T1 Student B: I'm more than just a black student. I'm also this and this and this and this, and like, to blow people away like that and you're like I'm not your average or what you probably perceive me to be or just other misconceptions. [(xxx) you know what I mean? So]

T2 Other students: [((laughter)) yeah!]=

T3 Student D: =Yes! There are more than one stereotype.

In Datum 4.2, Student B's speech resonated， arousing other students' active responses, and Student D used a complete sentence to conduct back channeling.

4.4.3 Indian students

The video captures a group discussion where back channeling was expressed primarily in a limited form. The most common nonverbal back channeling signs are nods of the head, though occasionally people will say aloud "yes." additional than these, no additional noteworthy instances of back channeling were observed.

4.5. Turn-holding strategy

4.5.1 Chinese students

As the video shows, throughout the proceedings, the utilization of turn-holding strategy was infrequent and of relatively limited variety. The term "first" was used as a structural technique and to introduce the flow of the talk at first. But as the conversation went on, more basic verbal cues like "um" and "yeah" were often used to signal the beginning of new turns. Furthermore, expressions like "as for me," "from my perspective," and "I want to share my experience" were used as cues to speak out or take the lead. In addition, it was noted that the inquiries "Can you introduce it more?" and "Can you tell us more about this?" were observed, and they functioned as requests or questions that successfully kept the discourse on course. Additionally, an instance of "now, is my turn" was noted, providing a straightforward and aggressive signal for taking turns throughout the exchange of turns. Finally, nodding and eye contact were also frequently used as sign of turn-holding strategy.

4.5.2 American students

The video demonstrates a high frequency of turn-holding strategies, while with monotonous diversity. Filler words, including "um," "yeah," "like," and "you know," are often used by members. Rather than adding meaningful content, these phrases are more often used as a signal to sustain speaking turns, which lengthens turn times for individuals. However, in the sharing of personal experiences, these kinds of cues—such as more direct phrases or sentences—are conspicuously absent. This could be because the discussion format is conversational and sharing in nature.

4.5.3 Indian students

The video showcases a relatively diverse range of turn-holding strategies employed during the group discussion. The most common include the usage of filler words like "um" and "like," as well as the linking phrase "to add to that" twice. Furthermore, the group use transitional phrases like "also" and "but" and references data and proof to sustain their speaking turns, exhibiting a diverse approach to conversational flow, as illustrated in Datum 5.

Datum 5

T1 Student B: This point we have 90% of the population already using the UPI transaction. As you can see, the vegetable stores are everywhere, where they were not used to accept the UPI transaction, now they are also using the UPI transaction. So we cannot say it will take a longer time, but awareness is very important so we have to focus on that part.=

T2 Student A: [=(xxx)]

T3 Student C: [= But] as you are saying that 90% of population doing UPI transaction like I don’t think that is correct data because around 70% of Indian population don’t have the accessibility or don’t use that kind.

In Datum 5, Student C utilized "but" as a turn-holding strategy to express his disagreement with the data in Student B's speech.

5. Conclusion

A comparative analysis of results reveals disparities in the strategies and frequencies of turn-taking among Chinese, American, and Indian students during group discussions. These variations likely

happen due to the influence of their respective cultures. The findings below highlight the importance of considering cultural nuances when analyzing conversational behaviors across different groups.

The analysis of Chinese students' turn-taking behavior in the group discussion revealed a distinct cultural influence, while American students' turn-taking behavior exhibited a higher degree of overlap and active engagement than Chinese students. However, Indian students' turn-taking behavior fell between the Chinese and American patterns, exhibiting a blend of structured and spontaneous conversational styles. While this study makes a valuable contribution to the understanding of cross-cultural turn-taking behaviors in group discussions, it is not without limitations. Firstly, sample size, though representative, may not fully capture the diversity within each cultural group. Secondly, video recordings as data source entail subjectivity in interpreting human behavior. Nonetheless, it provides insights into cultural variations among Chinese, American, and Indian students, informing educators on enhancing group discussions in multicultural settings and researchers exploring culture-communication interfaces.

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